

# The Abyssinian Lovebird

## *Agapornis taranta*

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Stanley discovered and named this vibrant lovebird species after the beautiful Taranta Pass in Ethiopia in 1814, where even today it's known to be commonly found.

The rare Abyssinian Lovebird, also known as the Black-winged Lovebird is exceptionally quiet, unlike other lovebird species. Their scientific name is *Agapornis Taranta*. French Name(s): Psittacula a masque rouge. German Name(s): Taranta Unzertrennlicher; Tarantapagei; Bergpagei. Dutch Name: Abessijne agapornis.

In 1906 Italian bird dealers are believed to have brought the first Abyssinians into Europe. Although it wasn't until 1909 that there is documentation of the first successful breeding.

In 1931, O. Neuman named a smaller race *Agapornis taranta nana*. He also named another race of the Abyssinian, which in size is between the *taranta* and *nana* races. He found this bird in Schoa near the higher part of the Sobat River. This bird he named the Omo Inseparable and is the size of the *Agapornis roseicollis*. These races have not generally achieved subspecific recognition.

Helmut Hampe published the first photograph of this bird, called "Die Unzertrennlichen" in 1934.

Within the last few years Abyssinian breeders in the U.S.A. have just begun to make a worthwhile effort to keep this species alive and promises to see that its many different bloodlines continue to flourish. In the last couple of years two federally approved United States Fish and Wildlife Cooperative Breeding Programs have been bringing

imported birds into the U.S.A. I am the coordinator of CB034. Our European counterparts, especially in Amsterdam and Belgium have had great success with this species and have not been afraid to share their knowledge and experiences.

This species' iridescent green body feathers combined with their bright rich red beak grasps one's eye and attention for more than just a minute. Their natural behavior keeps their interest in many things such as toys and new foods which piques an aviculturist's constant attention and curiosity. This perky and active lovebird species keeps its caretaker's constant eye and attention, as there is always something new to learn about their behavior.

The largest of the nine species of lovebirds, Abyssinians measure in at 6.5 inches. They weigh about 40-65 grams. It doesn't appear that one sex is larger than the other.

It is also one of three sexually dimorphic lovebird species (this means that one can tell their sex by their feather colors). The other two dimorphic species are the Madagascar (smallest lovebird) and the Red-faced.

In the Abyssinian, both sexes have bright red beaks but it is only the male that displays the bright red forehead. From the top of its beak to the middle top of its head and thinly lined around his eye are bright red feathers. It is a common thought among Abyssinian breeders that if a male and female display dark red beaks then they are considered to be in tip top breeding condition. Such as male budgerigars

would display a dark rich blue cere and a female a dark brown one. Both sexes have black tipped tail feathers and gray legs.

Abyssinians display more parrot-like characteristics than any other lovebird. In Germany they are also called the Mountain Parrot. They tend to like to climb, swing, and hang upside down. Many will hold their food while eating, — peanuts held with their toes, for instance. I've also witnessed many spending a great deal of time on the cage bottom.

The "Abbys" for short, are very docile lovebirds. It's not uncommon for Abyssinian breeders to have a few tame birds even though they are not handled or handled on a daily basis. For this reason they do great in bird shows, as they tend to stand extremely still and are not alarmed by sudden movement or loud noises.

This species is also very quiet. Their chirp is more like a song than a disturbing chatter.

Prior to entering my bird room I make my "entrance call" to let my birds know I'm entering. Many times each Abyssinian pair will talk back to me and they don't seem to quiet down until I have given them individual one on one attention such as a kiss through the cage wire. They also seem to thoroughly enjoy grooming the hairs on my goatee and moustache.

Last year I added a pair to my aviary that had been bonded for about six years but had never produced for their original owner. My first observation was that they liked to hide in the nest box all the time. They appeared to



*The breeding pair of Abyssinian Love Birds. Only the male has the red forehead.*

be shy which is quite rare for this species. I took the nest box away and they soon became accustomed to my entrance call. Within months they produced two healthy clutches for me.

In the wild, Abyssinians tend to live in small groups and are found in the forests and mountain areas of southern Eritrea and the southwestern highlands of Ethiopia up to 9,000 feet.

This species enjoys taking a bath even in cold weather. Each morning when I change their water it seems that they are just waiting for me to close the cage door so that they can jump in and bathe.

### Mutations

Besides the wild green color (0 DF) there is also the dark green (1 DF) and olive green (2 DF), the latter being the most expensive of all the mutations that are commonly known in this rare lovebird. A Cinnamon is also known to exist. There are also reports of a Lutino Abyssinian. Dr. William Schoon of Germany has produced a yellow Fallow female Abyssinian that unfortunately died of an ulcer at the age of two years.

A dark factor is an autosomal co-domination mutation. The factor being located on an autosomal gene it doesn't matter which bird is the cock and which

is the hen. Hence 2 DF x 1 DF gives you the same results as 1 DF x 2 DF.

For example:

0 DF = no DF or green (wild color green/common green)

1 DF = 1 DF or dark green

2 DF = 2 DF or olive green (double dark green)

Breeding results:

2 DF x 2 DF = 100% 2 DF

2 DF x 1 DF = 50% 2 DF & 50% 1 DF

2 DF x 0 DF = 100% 1 DF

1 DF x 1 DF = 25% 0 DF, 50% 1 DF & 25% 2 DF

1 DF x 0 DF = 50% 1 DF & 50% 0 DF

0 DF x 0 DF = 100% 0 DF

Since it is a co-dominant mutation, birds split for dark factor do not exist.

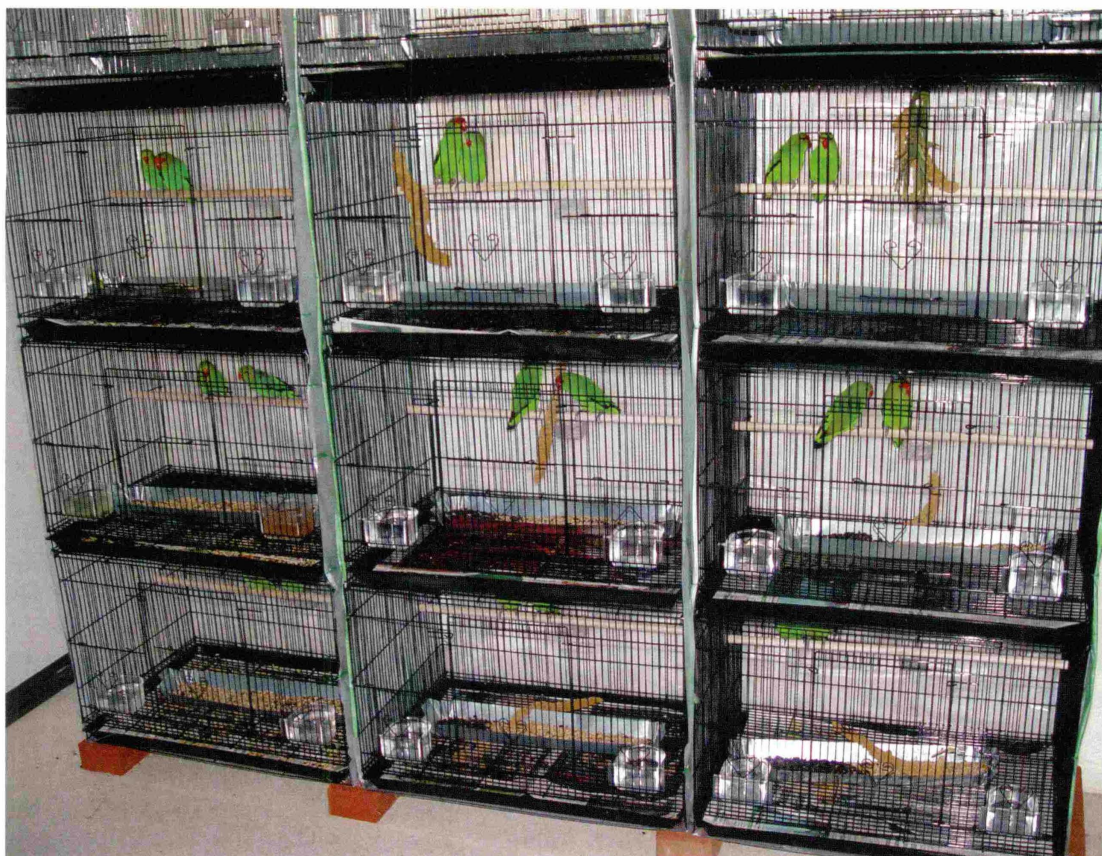
### Diet

Abbys are the messiest of all lovebirds. It's difficult to keep their perches clean because they're constantly wiping their beaks on them. For whatever reason, females seem to allow the males to eat first. This lovebird species seem to try any food that you put in their cage and they are known to be quite willing to try new foods. Their diet consists of many types of seeds, pellets, sprouted seeds, bean mix, and supplemented with many different vegetables and fruits. Sunflower seeds (small black oily), figs, rose hips (high in vitamin C), and juniper berries (high in vitamin B) are mainstays in their diet and relished by this species. Most lovebird breeders do not feed their birds lots of sunflower seeds except the



*Another angle looking at the breeding pair of Abyssinian Love Birds.*





*These cages hold the birds while they get acquainted with one another. You notice there are no nest boxes.*

Abby breeder. The higher fat is required for their diet. During the breeding season feeding unlimited sunflower seed seems to get the birds in the mood to reproduce. Abbys that twist their necks all the time

are said to be lacking vitamin B in their diet. My birds love to eat the stems of romaine lettuce. Sprouted and cooked quinoa seems to also be a favorite.

two swords. My cages have hamster wheels, swings and a twisted rope. This species is very alert and aware of what the aviculturist puts into their cage.

### **Housing**

My Abbys are individually housed in 4 foot L X 18 inches H & W cages

### **Breeding**

It is the female that clearly dominates this relationship. She seems to let



*Breeding cages set up with nest boxes.*



*Detail of the food trays. A large assortment of foods is accepted by the Abyssinian Love Birds*



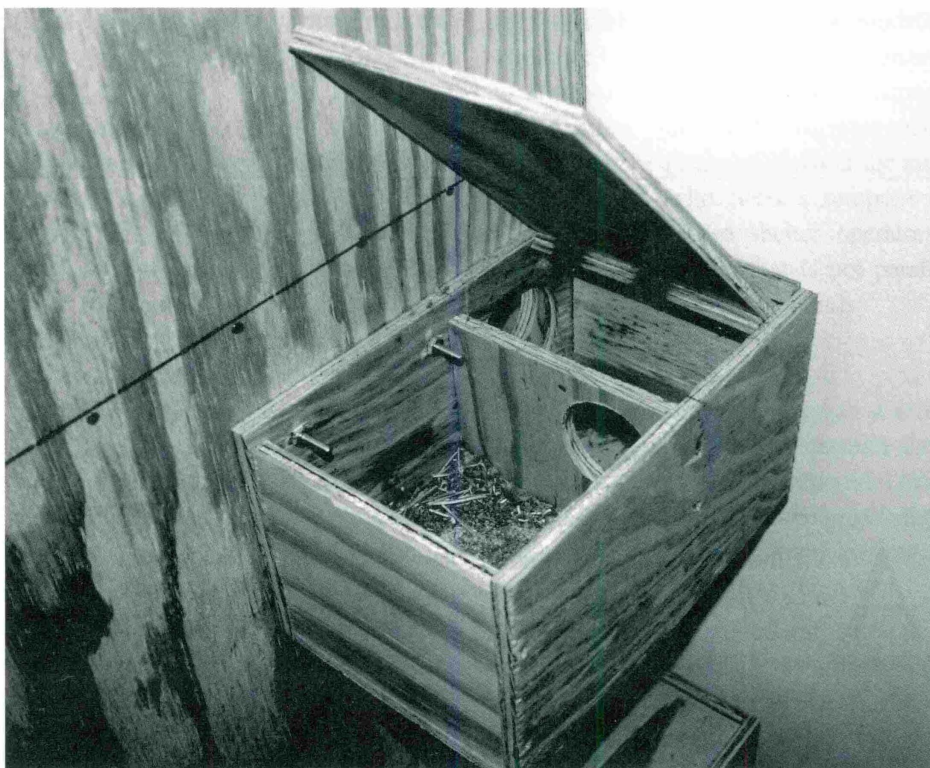
the male know when she wants to be fed and mounted by bobbing her head up and down, the whole while chirping to him. During the mating ritual the female makes a chirping sound that one will remember forever once you hear it. The male mounts his mate longer than other lovebird species as he goes from side to side, the whole time she's flapping her wings and loudly chirping.

They seem to breed during the colder months. On the outside of the cage I attach two five-inch square nests together. One attached slightly lower. The nest's entrance hole is 2 inches in diameter. The male will inspect the nest first as to make sure it is OK for the female prior to her entrance. I fill the lower part of the nest with material as hens do not built nests. When she's ready she'll throw all the nesting material out of both chambers. It is best to use a concave bottom to assure that the eggs do not roll about the nest.

Many pairs seem to pick each other's feathers prior to laying eggs. A hen tends to have a brooding patch and lines her nest with feathers. It appears that the feathers are pulled off inside the nest as I rarely see hens carry anything into their nesting chambers.

Hens lay 3-5 and rarely 6 eggs. Four eggs seem to be more common. While the hen is brooding she does not allow her mate in the nest chamber where she's sitting. This is why I use a double-chambered nest box. He feeds her while in the first part of the chamber and he also sleeps in this part at night. The eggs take 24-28 days to hatch and the chicks grow much slower than other lovebirds. Newly hatched chicks are extremely vocal and active within their nests. It's quite common to see hatchlings snuggled up in the nest's corners. They are banded at 10-12 days. Both sexes at this age look like the female with the exception of the brilliant red beak.

Most Abyssinians seem to pluck their young right around two weeks of age. It is not uncommon for a hen to lose several newly hatched nests until they learn how to feed their young.



*Nest box details. Note the two chambers in the box. The brooding female occupies the inner chamber and refuses to let the male in. He has the first chamber to sleep in.*

They wean at around 8 1/2 to 9 1/2 weeks of age. Males get the red forehead at 3 1/2 to 6 months of age.

It is often said that once the pinfeathers come in that the red ones distinguish the males. I have never had a young bird with red pinfeathers. An experienced Abby breeder can tell the sex of their chicks as soon as the feathers come in. Young males have solid dark black under wing coverts and females have sketchy gray ones. Chicks are aggressive eaters.

When I first started learning about Abbys I was told that they hardly double clutch. But I have had to stop mine from breeding by covering the nest's entrance hole. Abyssinians eat a lot anyhow but with chicks in the nest they must constantly have food in their cage. I use two eighteen inch feeding trays. One for sunflower seeds and the other is for a mixture of many other seeds.

### My Observations

In this species I have observed two habits that I have not seen in other lovebirds. My first observation is that

when the hen is getting ready to lay her first egg the male will constantly chase her back into the nest, such as a male pigeon does to his mate. This is the only time I have seen the male display aggressive behavior.

My second observation is that on many occasions I find my males squatting down, displaying the female's role, chirping, and waiting to be mounted by their female counterpart. He'll flap his wings constantly while chirping the whole time. Each time the female looks quite confused and they end up pecking and fighting each other. I have never witnessed a female mount a male.

As mentioned earlier, this species really enjoys taking baths. I have found that they will not take baths in dirty water. They also seem to enjoy soaking some of their fruits and vegetables in their drinking water.

To share or learn more about the Abyssinian lovebird join the Abyssinian Love Bird List at:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AbyssinianLoveBirds/>

